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ABSTRACT

This paper expands on one educator's experiences teaching advanced English at a Mexican private college, focusing on the productive use of collaborative learning (CL). CL is a philosophy of teaching that involves working, building, learning, changing, and improving together. A key element of CL is positive interdependence, with students believing that they are linked with others in a way that ensures that they all succeed together. The teacher's role is to guide the students, clearly explaining the objectives of CL and the use of roles and positive interdependence within CL groups. Teachers act as guides in the CL group, rather than authoritarians. Evaluation of CL should include both group/peer evaluation and in-class peer evaluation. Steps to follow when evaluating the CL process include handing in a collaboratively written team report (that provides a grade for the team and a justification for that grade) and handing in individual team member reports (that provide a grade for each member and justifications for those grades). Justification for grades in co-evaluation is important, and it is essential that students are unbiased in their judgments and base their grading on the quality of the presentations, not the individuals giving the presentations. (SM)

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How does Collaborative Learning actually work in a (Mexican) classroom and how do students react to it? A Brief Reflection.

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After studying the works of the Johnson brothers I felt like implementing their and others' theories on Collaborative Learning in my own classroom. I've never been a theoretical person: I prefer to do, rather than think about what I'm actually doing. I this short text I would like to expand on my ideas on Collaborative Learning and how it has affected my work as a teacher of advanced English at one of Mexico's most prestigious private colleges. The text will be based on experiences with this advanced English course and on practice, rather than theory. Two main, overlapping points will be addressed here:

1) **What is Collaborative Learning?**
2) **How can it be used productively?**

Collaborative Learning (*CL* from now on) is a philosophy of teaching. It's not a series of techniques to have less work as a teacher and to try to make students' lives miserable. I'm saying this because that's the impression many people still have. They feel that nothing beats the traditional teacher controlled classroom. Of course I'm not eliminating traditional teaching as a whole. I just don't feel that that is a way to increase students' learning fully. They may learn a lot, but they may also forget a lot very quickly.

CL is a philosophy: working together, building together, learning together, changing together, and improving together. It's a philosophy that fits today's globalized world. If different people learn to work together in the classroom, then I believe they will become better citizens of the world. It will be easier for them to interact positively with people who think differently, not only on a local scale, but also worldwide.

In the international business field we can see that multinationals have to work together in order to survive, no matter how powerful they are; educational institutes are working together to make their students ready for the future; the European Union will become a strong competitor for the US. Collaboration is everywhere. China has opened its borders; North and South Korea are on speaking terms. Individualism/ Isolationism won't get you anywhere. Not anymore. Collaboration is the key to becoming a more complete person. Kristin Gerdy of Brigham Young University once wrote:

"Learning is enhanced when it is more like a team effort than a solo race. Good learning, like good work, is collaborative and social, not competitive and isolated...Sharing one's ideas and responding to others' improves thinking and deepens understanding" **(Gerdy)**

Collaboration is more than cooperation. I would say that cooperation is a technique to finish a certain product together: the faster, the better; the less work for each, the better. Collaboration refers to the whole process of learning, to students teaching each other, students teaching the teacher (why not?) and of course the

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teacher teaching the students too. Unfortunately, many teachers are not ready to take that position in the classroom yet: students teaching the teacher. Let me give a practical example of that. If you let your students do research on different topics e.g. different countries where English is an official language (in my advanced English class), then you can also learn a lot as a teacher. Imagine 25 students studying different topics. They will surely find some information that the teacher doesn't know. Of course it would be possible to limit the topic to play it safe, but I don't think that that would be very rewarding for both students and teachers. An activity like this promotes your students' learning. They will feel proud if you can tell them: "Oh, I didn't know that...!" If you make this a CL activity, then you congratulate the whole group with a comment like that. You promote *student involvement* (an essential element to keep them focused), you have them *work dynamically* and you make them *feel good* about something they have achieved totally by themselves. These three points help make CL a rewarding experience for teachers and students.

A key element in CL is positive interdependence:

"Students need to believe that they are linked with others in a way that ensures that they all succeed together. Each participant may have a different role, but that role must be crucial to the group process. Example roles could include:
a) a reader who reads and interprets the assignment to the group;
b) an encourager who prods all members to participate in information gathering and discussion;
c) a summarizer who restates the group's consensus findings;
d) a checker who makes sure that all members can explain how to solve the assigned problem or generate the appropriate report material;
e) an elaborator who relates the current concepts to what the group knows from previous experience; and
f) a recording observer who keeps track of how the group is performing and how each member is fulfilling the assigned role." (Klemm)

I would simply define positive interdependence as a situation in which students make an effort to teach each other and learn from each other. If they take different roles within the group, they will each be able to focus on a certain aspect during the learning process and thus work more efficiently. In addition to Klemm's point b) I would say that it should also be a requirement to organize information gathering, or at least keep track of what each member has found. If that is not controlled, then different members could find the same information, which wouldn't be effective. To use the same assignment in which students need to find information about countries where English is an official language (objectives of that assignment are: increasing general knowledge, vocabulary, cultural differences and tolerance): one member could focus on politics, another on economy, yet another on culture and so on. Then, if Klemm's points are followed, the group can come to a very complete and positive result, learning throughout the process.

What is then a teacher's role in this context? In the first place, a teacher should be a guide to his/ her students. It's important to clearly explain the objectives of CL. It may sometimes be a new system for students (especially in countries like Mexico, where public schools mostly teach traditionally; fortunately, the system has been changing rapidly in private schools) and they may need some time to get used to it; however, something different is always a good way to get the students' attention and interest. The ones that are reluctant at first, will soon be convinced by the dynamic

nature of this now form of teaching and they will definitely notice a welcome change in their learning process.

It is also the teacher's task to explain the use of roles within the groups and to emphasize positive interdependence. Some members may again be reluctant at first, but hopefully, through positive interdependence, they will become more open to the philosophy. The other members of the group have an important role here: guide reluctant students and help them become participative and get a more complete and satisfying group result. Another element of CL that comes in here is *effective interpersonal communication*. (see Johnson and Johnson). In a few words, I would say that effective interpersonal communication refers to group members staying in contact with each other regularly, making sure that their communication is clear and to the point. This can be easily achieved at present, using current communication techniques such as on-line messenger services, e-mail and/ or on-line forums; we should not forget telephone and face to face interaction, the latter being undoubtedly the ultimate form of communication.

Evaluation of CL (here in an advanced English class) is quite a challenge. How can a teacher evaluate the learning process, and not just the product? The teacher can't possibly participate in all chats, discussions and meetings of all his/ her students. To give an idea, I will share two techniques that I have found to work very well in the classroom:

1) Group/ peer evaluation
2) In–class peer evaluation

1) This technique works for both partial exams and final exams:

EVALUATION COLLABORATIVE LEARNING IN AN ADVANCED ENGLISH CLASS.

Please follow these steps to participate in the evaluation of the process of *Collaborative Learning* during this course.

In an envelope or folder (portfolio) you'll hand in two reports:

a team report, written collaboratively, in which you include
1) a grade for your team
2) a justification for that grade

individual team members reports in a closed envelope, or simply stapled (for teacher's eyes only!) with
1) a grade for each member
2) and your justification for those grades.

According to the elements you suggested in one of our first sessions, you may want to include the following in your justification for individual reports:

participation of the individual, taking into account the quality and quantity.
Punctuality
Respect
Honesty
Ideas
Creativity
Commitment
Preparation

Of course some of these elements overlap.

For now the percentage of your portfolio grade will be 10% of each partial. The general grade of the portfolio will be as follows: 50% group evaluation + 50% individual member evaluation.

Example: Your team decides to give the team 95; however, Fulanito gets 50, 60 and 70 from his respective team member, because he didn't really make an effort. The average of those three grades is: 60. Thus, his 10% grade will be 77.5, which will become 78.

This portfolio needs to be handed in the day before the date of each partial exam.

A few comments on the above technique: in order to promote student involvement, I ask the class on one of the first days of the semester to discuss the evaluation of the process of CL. First, they discuss it in their CL groups and then (a) representative(s) of the team present(s) their ideas to the rest of the class and the teacher; consequently, this evaluation technique is based on their comments. As for the percentage: that's up to the teacher. 10% isn't much, but it might be recommendable for a first partial. If it works well, it would be good to increase that percentage, so that the students feel even more involved. The individual peer evaluations are top secret to ensure unbiased grading. They can really express how they feel about their fellow group members.

2) This technique can be used for in-class group (video and 'live') presentations:

When there's a group presentation in front of the rest of the class, the teacher can ask three or four students that are not members of the presenting CL group to evaluate the presentation. It is essential to set the standards for such an evaluation, so that the evaluators clearly know how and what. E.g. the teacher could ask them to evaluate the following points on a scale from 1 to 10: fluency, body language, grammar, vocabulary, information, confidence, teamwork. The teacher can hand out a spreadsheet with those (or other) elements and enough space for grades and, very important, justification.

The justification for grades in co-evaluation is very important. It's essential that students are unbiased in their judgments and base their grading on the quality of the presentations, not on the individuals giving the presentation.

Collaborative Learning is a very enriching process, both for teachers and students. It is clear that the teacher's role in a CL group is that of a guide, rather than that

of a authoritarian ruler (traditional teaching). It is rewarding in that students learn by themselves, learn more, learn interpersonal/ social skills, feel more involved, feel more dedicated, feel more confident, enjoy the class, teach each other, teach the teacher, become independent learners, and maybe become better citizens of the world.

It's important to constantly reinforce the process of collaborative learning, otherwise students tend to go back to cooperative learning, and only do whatever they can to get a good grade. In due course, the students will become more and more collaborative, but it is important to remind them of the philosophy behind CL on a regular basis.

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